

# Art and Symbol in Nietzsche's Aesthetics

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In this paper I want to suggest an interpretation of Nietzsche's understanding of "art" in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Whilst the work is presented as a contribution "the science of aesthetics" it is made clear in the first sentence of the first section of the work that the nature of this "science" is here being reconfigured so that "the immediate certainty of vision" is given its due. What Nietzsche wants to bring to our "vision" is the way in which the development of art is bound up with the "duality" of Apollinian and Dionysian. The use Nietzsche makes of these figures is based on a notion of the "symbol" that I will contrast with that described by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* and whose connection to the description of the distinct experiences of viewing and creating art I will set out.

## The Two Art Deities

The use of the figures of the gods is explained through a vast extension of the area covered by them, beyond that which could be based on purely philological criteria. Hence Nietzsche for example speaks of the whole Olympian world as being an expression of the Apollinian so that Apollo is not one god amongst others. Apollo, as the pre-eminent recognized deity of art is linked to the transfiguration of existence brought about by the erection of the Olympian world as Nietzsche states in section 3: "The same impulse which calls art into being, as the complement and consummation of existence, seducing one to a continuation of life, was also the cause of the Olympian world which the Hellenic

‘will’ made use of as a transfiguring mirror. Thus do the gods justify the life of man: they themselves live it—the only satisfactory theodicy!”<sup>1</sup>

This connection between art and the Olympian world is not fully accounted for within the work until Nietzsche attempts an account of the experience of listening to *Tristan and Isolde* in §21. Here Nietzsche confronts the question of how we can bear to be confronted with this music, particularly its third act, in which the overwhelming force of the music seems to point to a sphere beyond that of any individual experience? In responding to this question he argues that the place of the words and images in the symphony of *Tristan and Isolde* performs the function of presenting “symbols of the most universal facts” and these symbols are in fact given in the form of the individuals presented in the course of the drama: “The glorious Apollinian illusion makes it appear as if even the tone world confronted us as a sculpted world, as if the fate of Tristan and Isolde had been formed and moulded in it, too, as in an exceedingly tender and expressive material” (§21). Effectively the interaction of the drama and the music occurs through the drama giving us a symbolization of that which the music sets forth in universal terms so that “the image, the concept, the ethical teaching, and the sympathetic emotion” tear us away from the universal message of the music and convince us that it is one story we are being told in which representative individuals are led to a realm of destruction and death. The extension of this argument to the formation of myth itself is carried further in the concluding sections. Nietzsche here informs us that the tragic myth is a “symbolization of Dionysian wisdom through Apollinian artifices” (§22). Myth is itself a “concentrated image of the world” (§23). The expression of it in tragic drama provokes an awareness of a paradox of tremendous dimensions: “The brightest clarity of the image did not suffice us, for this seemed just as much to reveal something as to conceal something. Its revelation,

like a parable, seemed to summon us to tear the veil and to uncover the mysterious background; but at the same time this all-illuminated total visibility cast a spell over the eyes and prevented them from penetrating deeper” (§24). Here we are given a decisive clue about that which Nietzsche terms the “Apollinian”. Whilst what is named by this term is pre-eminently visual and the absorption therewith in the world of the apparent the clarity that can be reached with vision reaching intensity is one in which vision itself seems to conceal something *through* its revelation. Concealment through maximal visibility: this is the nature of what Nietzsche terms Apollinian *Schein*.

The genesis of this *Schein* emerges from the problem of relation to existence itself. The affirmation of life that is promised by the Olympian gods comes from a covering over of the chasm or abyss that threatens when the Dionysian approaches: in what does this chasm consist but in the revelation of an eternal suffering at the heart of life, a suffering told symbolically by Nietzsche in the parable of Silenus in §3. The accounting for this in terms of the vision of the artist is, as stated in that section, at one with the arrival of the Olympian art world as a “middle world” between empirical reality and the chasm of Dionysian truth. When expressing this “middle world” in terms of the artist Nietzsche’s fullest portrayal is given in his account of the surprisingly “self-centred” world of lyric poetry. In describing the possibility of this poetry Nietzsche sets out a two-fold portrayal of engagement with vision, a two-fold portrayal that explains from the creator’s standpoint the spectator’s dual feelings when confronted with a tragedy (as expressed in the account of *Tristan and Isolde*).

**I**n the first place, as a Dionysian artist he has identified himself with the primal unity, its pain and contradiction. Assuming that music has been correctly termed a repetition and a recast of the world, we may say that he produces a copy of this primal unity as music.

Now, however, under the Apollinian dream inspiration, this music reveals itself to him again as a *symbolic dream image*. The inchoate, intangible reflection of the primordial pain in music, with its redemption in mere appearance, now produces a second mirroring as a specific symbol or example. The artist has already surrendered his subjectivity in the Dionysian process. The image that now shows him his identity with the heart of the world is a dream scene that embodies the primordial contradiction and primordial pain, together with the primordial pleasure, of mere appearance. The 'I' of the lyricist therefore sounds from the depth of his being.... (§5)

**T**he lyric poet hence first identifies himself with the pain of the world and the unification of the world in pain as a basic reality. This level of relation to experience is the origin of a musical form but the lyric poet recasts, under artistic inspiration, this music into an image and this gives him symbols or examples *including the example of himself*. Hence the self of the artist that is expressed in the work of art is itself an Apollinian image of the original Dionysian process and if this is what occurs in the production of the work of art we can easily extend this to our comprehension of the mythic world as itself an artistic transfiguration of the original Dionysian reality into a set of examples and that the provision of the power of this exemplification is what we term "Apollinian" and hence this is the sense in which Apollo is the father of all the Olympian world but what is depicted in the tragic stories that emerge from this world will hence be, in each case, a picturing of the Dionysian as Nietzsche suggests in §10 when he asserts that "all the celebrated figures of the Greek stage" are "mere figures of the original hero, Dionysus". In each case the dismemberment and destruction of the hero are parables of the dismemberment and destruction visited upon Dionysus.

It is worth emphasizing at this point the manner in which Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* depicts this fate of Dionysus. In §10 Nietzsche describes the myths of Dionysus that include the story that he was torn to pieces as a boy and worshipped in this state as Zagreus.<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche connects this myth here to the view that the origin of individuation coincided with the arrival of suffering and then connects this view to his interpretation of the core of tragedy in relation to myth: “this is symbolized in the myth of Demeter, sunk in eternal sorrow, who *rejoices* again for the first time when told that she may *once more* give birth to Dionysus. This view of things already provides us with all the elements of a profound and pessimistic view of the world, together with the *mystery doctrine of tragedy*: the fundamental knowledge of the oneness of everything existent, the conception of individuation as the primal cause of evil, and of art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken in augury of a restored oneness” (§10). Here we see the key notion of an eternal return of the exemplified fate as being something that is at the heart of art and enables art to express hope within the tale of tragedy. It is, indeed, the access to the eternal that is the key motif of *The Birth of Tragedy* as is stated when Nietzsche writes in §23 that any person or set of people is “worth only as much as it is able to press upon its experiences the stamp of the eternal”. This is the core of the insistent opposition expressed within this work to secularisation as the process of this is seen as reductive of perspective to a mere *sub specie saeculi*.

If however the figures of Apollo and Dionysus are now comprehended in terms of the wide symbolic significance given to them by Nietzsche it is important to connect this notion of the key role of the symbol back to Kant’s discussion. In §59 of the *Critique of Judgment* Kant describes the operation of symbols in the following way: “Symbolic exhibition uses an analogy...in which judgment performs a double function: it applies the

concept to the object of an empirical intuition; and then it applies the mere rule by which it reflects on that intuition to an entirely different object, of which the former object is only the symbol” (Ak. 5: 352). The double process described here is reminiscent of the two-fold portrayal of the lyric poet in §5 of *The Birth of Tragedy*. The lyric poet experiences the application of a universal rule to an intuition in terms of the relation between music and phenomena with the rule of connection between them comprehended through the image so that the music is experienced *as* an image. Whilst Kantian symbols operate through the double function of judgment’s relation to a rule, a universality of application and conceptuality, Nietzschean symbols by contrast operate by means of immersion in images forming an rule-governed process whereby both oneself and any perceptual states in question are translated into a medium of vision which represents the states in question to oneself. The rationale for the difference is also contained in the alignment of symbolization by Kant with the sublime as when he states that in the process of symbolization: “there is a concept which only reason can think and to which no intuition can be adequate” (Ak. 5: 351), an aesthetic state in which intuition cannot match the notion that we are capable of forming. That such a state must hence be distinct from those expressed by Nietzsche is a consequence of the difference we have uncovered. It is worth setting out this difference in terms of how Nietzsche uses the terms “beautiful” and “sublime” in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Since we have uncovered the Apollinian as the origin of the art world we can clearly see that it involves a transfiguration of the world through the provision of exemplification or symbols. Nietzsche identifies the Apollinian with “the sphere of beauty” (§4) and understands this sphere as one of *Schein*. For Kant the beautiful forces attention to the moment and through this attention permits us access to the eternal and this accords with the picture that Nietzsche has of the Apollinian as

through its portrayal of images and symbols it permits recognition of the eternal. Whilst the notion of the beautiful is markedly distinguished from that of the sublime for Kant the relation between them appears much closer for Nietzsche as his identification of Apollo with art in general suggests a number of times that the Apollinian is not only the “sphere of beauty” but that it includes also the sublime as when Nietzsche speaks of Apollo’s “sublime gestures” (§4) or describes the sublime itself as “the artistic taming of the horrible” (§7). The distinction here crumbles for Nietzsche partly because he includes the sublime *within* the realm of art, from which Kant carefully excludes it. An additional reason however is that the elevation over power that Kant elucidated in the dynamical sublime is an essential part of existence in general for Nietzsche, not merely a transitory if important state. If the Apollinian involves a relation to both the sublime and the beautiful this does not mean that we cannot distinguish them within the Apollinian however as the beautiful effect of tragedy and art concerns the inmost core of the Apollinian, i.e., the *principium individuationis* whilst the sublime is the presentation of that which strains at and threatens to tear the veil of individuation so that the sublime is the experience of the closest proximity of the Dionysian as a shattering power.

Nietzsche from the first section of the work portrays a transcendental aesthetic in which the figures of Apollo and Dionysus are used to point out the experiences that break the flow of experience as given in the “inner sense”: the experiences of dreams and intoxications. The work’s central revisiting of the transcendental aesthetic is hence carried out as a portrayal of the necessity of the absorption into the illusory character of dreams in which figures pass into each other for the experience of art as such. Hence the experience of art is carefully drawn within the reworked transcendental aesthetic whilst Kant, as with the sublime, carefully keeps from describing art itself in these terms. As art is so determined so must the

shock of the Dionysian collapse of the rule of individuation be the constant danger that tragedy foretells in its retailing of the end of each hero, an end that eternally symbolizes the return of the phenomena of *Schein*.

### Eternal Return and Transfiguration

We have noted the appearance of the motif of eternal return in *The Birth of Tragedy's* description of the “mystery doctrine of tragedy” in section 10 to which we might add the reference of section 24 to the citation of Heraclitus’ notion of the “world-building force” that is like “a playing child that places stones here and there and builds sand hills only to overthrow them again”. Within *The Birth of Tragedy* the duality of the Apollinian and Dionysian is consistently asserted despite the fact that essentially a unity is being conveyed in the notion of the visionary symbol constantly introducing us to forms of the same. In Nietzsche’s later works the notion of the Apollinian drops from view with the Dionysian taking on characteristics of both figures. That this has to do with a new insistence on the unitary nature of aesthetic experience is something that can be evidenced by, for example, the treatment of Goethe in *Twilight of the Idols*. Here Goethe is mentioned as having an aspiration to totality, as rejecting that which “is separate and individual” and as having a view of affirmation that includes “everything” (§49). This is why Nietzsche can designate Goethe as being Dionysian, despite the fact that the Dionysian is precisely that which is asserted to have escaped Goethe’s picture of the Greeks. In asserting Goethe’s Dionysian character Nietzsche is asserting that the Goethean artist is, like the lyric poet of *The Birth of Tragedy*, one who symbolically represents the unitary division that is at the heart of experience.

In rejecting Goethe's picture of the Greeks however the nature of the Dionysian is affirmed to include the notions that *The Birth of Tragedy* emphasizes in its very title and notion: eternal recurrence, the sanctity of procreation and the necessity therewith of the "torment of childbirth" and the realisation of "the eternal joy of becoming". This emphasis is what permits the closure of *Twilight of the Idols* with the statement that "the *Birth of Tragedy* was my first revaluation of all values", the revaluation that involves Nietzsche claiming to be the disciple of Dionysus and therewith the teacher of eternal recurrence.

If Nietzsche hence comes to assimilate the Apollinian and the Dionysian together under the name of the latter what effect does this have on the subsequent symbolization of the eternal return? In his "Attempt at a Self-Criticism" of *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche famously claims that: "It should have *sung* this 'new soul'" (*ASC*, §3). The implication that the work lacked the musicality that it extolled is certainly remedied in the writing of *Zarathustra*. The poetic nature of the work is punctuated in fact by regular sections that are declared to be songs and it includes much dancing. The conclusion of Part III, the "Seven Seals" is subtitled "The Song of Yes and Amen" and it includes a reiterated chorus. Zarathustra's imagery here includes a reference to pregnancy, pregnancy of "lightnings which affirm Yes! Laugh Yes!" and indicate that there is a woman by whom Zarathustra would have children and whom he loves: this woman is said to be eternity and the relation between Zarathustra and eternity is symbolized in the "wedding ring of rings – the Ring of Recurrence". The conclusion of the song also involves an assertion that words are made for the heavy, to be light one must sing.

The nature of these images has to be traced back to the very first section of the work, "The Three Metamorphoses of the Spirit". Here Zarathustra distinguishes between the camel, the lion and the child.

Whilst the first can bear the heaviest weight, the second creates freedom for the possibility of new creation and the child is the basis of that new creation. Nietzsche's own trajectory is thus set out and along with it three attitudes to recurrence: with the camel, we are in the world of *The Birth of Tragedy* in which the burden of eternal return is still the greatest weight, a notion repeated elsewhere in Nietzsche's work but which the style of *The Birth of Tragedy* conveys in its ponderousness. With the assertion of the creation of a space for creation Nietzsche's nay-saying period of the "free spirit" trilogy is invoked in which much of what clung to the vision of *The Birth of Tragedy* is pared away whilst its essential vision is reasserted, as in the key preface to *The Gay Science* where the attention to an "an art for artists, for artists only" is reclaimed. But the figure of the child, the opening to a new creation that is one with the innocence of its proclamation is the moment of *Zarathustra* itself. Here Nietzsche comes to a style that takes the form of a proclamation by one who can parody the act of proclamation. This involves a revisiting of music, of the nature of a music that will be able to claim a relation to Dionysus.

This occurs in the section of *Zarathustra* aptly entitled "Of the Sublime Men". In this section we are told, in a manner reminiscent of the Antinomy of Aesthetic Judgment, that all life is a dispute over taste and tasting. Taste is here described as "weight and scales and weighing" and yet the image of the "sublime man" of the section's title is uncannily familiar as we are told that he has tamed monsters and solved riddles but not yet transformed his monsters and riddles into "heavenly children". The Sublime Man sounds so like Oedipus and yet, also like the Apollinian culture of the Greeks in general that was formed by such conquest of monsters. The "Sublime Man" is however reminded here that beauty is not attainable to a violent will and the central statement is made: "When power grows gracious and

descends into the visible: I call such descending beauty”. Beauty is itself here a product of the possibility of power becoming visible: something that accords with Kant’s insistence that spirit is itself life and the suggestion in the account of the dynamical sublime that it is the experience of power that we can over-power that elevates. The descent into visibility is the Apollinian itself and this descent is what makes possible the vision of eternal return although the affirmation of the vision is in the works of the 1880’s termed “Dionysian”. This transformation of vocabulary can be taken to involve the symbolic triumph of symbolization itself: in subsuming both art deities under this name the attempt is made to forge a style that will express its beauty in its assimilation of the temporality that it conveys, it will thus be eternal in its range.

If *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Zarathustra* thus both seem to require this integration of art with sublimity in order to further beauty then what seems to have occurred between Kant and Nietzsche is a thinking of life itself through the prism of the aesthetic. The possibilities and problems of this transformation would be that which would open anew the fundamental question of what it means to have anything we can term an *experience* of art.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche (1872) *The Birth of Tragedy From the Spirit of Music, or Hellenism and Pessimism* (1967 trans. by Walter Kaufman: Vintage Books: New York).

<sup>2</sup> The relation of Dionysus to Zagreus is in fact mythically very complicated. Nietzsche is here following the practice noted by Ivan Linforth to be common, that of using the myth of Zagreus “as an allegorical representation of events quite different from those in the myth itself”. Ivan M. Linforth (1941) *The Arts of Orpheus* (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles), p. 316. The connection of the myth to the origin of individual is, as Linforth states, a Stoic interpretation.